

MANY DAY LABORERS PREFER THEIR WORK TO REGULAR JOBS

AT SOME GATHERING SITES THEY SET THEIR OWN MINIMUM WAGES,
USUALLY HIGHER THAN STATE'S, STUDY FINDS.

By NANCY CLEELAND

© Copyright 1999 Times Mirror Company - Reprinted with permission

The first comprehensive study of Southern California's day laborers has found a surprising range of experience and wages among the men who gather on urban street corners and in hardware store parking lots, indicating that a significant share prefer the unstable work to more traditional low-wage jobs.



UCLA researchers over the past two years interviewed 481 *jornaleros* at 87 sites, including eight hiring centers built and operated by cities and nonprofit organizations. Although the majority of workers were recently arrived illegal immigrants who had few options for earning money, one-fourth were longtime U.S. residents who had been plying their trade at the same site for more than six years. Several said they had left factory and restaurant jobs because they were able to make more money on the street.

The study--which identified 97 hiring sites in Los Angeles County and parts of Orange County, and estimated the region's total day laborer population at 20,000--injects fact into what has long been an emotionally loaded issue.

"It's not as desperate as you might think, and it's not as chaotic as you might think," said Abel Valenzuela, associate director of the university's Center for the Study of Urban Poverty and the study's author.

Valenzuela said the proliferation of day laborers during the last decade may have as much to do with the changing U.S. economy and its impact on low-skilled workers as it does with a 30-year wave of immigration from Mexico and Central America.

"If I had to put a number on it, I'd say it's 65% changing economy, 35% immigration," he said. "By most accounts, the recent wave of immigration started in 1964, and you didn't see the massive growth in day labor sites then. You do see it in the last 10 years, as jobs have become more flexible, more temporary and more part-time."

As if to prove the point, several laborers who gathered Thursday morning outside the Builders Discount warehouse on Pico Boulevard in Los Angeles complained bitterly about the increasing use of staffing agencies to fill factory jobs, and the instability of jobs that were once considered permanent.

"At least here, you can negotiate your wages. If you're confident, you can earn \$ 80, \$ 90, even \$ 100 a day," said a Guatemalan immigrant who identified himself only as Miguel.

At the same time, Miguel, who said he had worked as a day laborer for 10 years, worried that there are now too many workers competing for too few jobs.

Surrounding him were a diverse mix of workers, from a 17-year-old who had arrived from Guatemala only a month earlier to seasoned veterans who wore backpacks loaded with tools. Such veterans play a valuable role at hiring sites, Valenzuela said, often serving as brokers or middlemen who parcel out work to reliable friends and acquaintances.

The researcher also found that workers at many gathering spots had established their own minimum wages for that site and that those were nearly always higher than the state minimum of \$ 5.75 per hour. Such informal arrangements may preclude the need for publicly operated hiring centers, which set minimum wages and often assign work based on a lottery system, Valenzuela said.

Hiring corners have been a part of the Southern California landscape for at least two decades, and a source of complaints from residents and business owners for about as long. In response, at least a dozen cities in the region, as well as Los Angeles County, have passed laws banning street-corner solicitation, some with the hope of pushing the workers into regulated sites with strict rules of behavior.

Job Solicitation Bans Have Mixed Record

That carrot-and-stick approach has become the solution of choice for many cities faced with complaints about litter, traffic problems, public urination and drinking.

However, laws banning solicitation have had only mixed success, even when paired with hiring centers. And they may be vulnerable to legal challenges. The county's 1998 ordinance, which has no hiring center element, is the target of a lawsuit by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, which maintains that the ban violates the 1st Amendment.



Labor unions, particularly in the building trades, are equally adamant in their opposition to publicly funded centers, claiming that they sanction nonunion, low-wage labor that directly competes with their members.

"I don't think that to date there is a solution that works for everyone," said Pablo Alvarado, who is attempting to organize a union of day laborers through the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles. The group is also involved in running five hiring centers in conjunction with city governments.



The study clarifies the demographics of day laborers, but those findings will come as little surprise to anyone who has observed the sites. Typically, workers are young, male immigrants from Mexico and Central America. Educational attainment varies widely, but more than half have less than six years of schooling.

Nearly all--about 95%--entered the United States illegally. And although

some have since gained legal residency, the overwhelming majority remain undocumented.

Most work involves construction, painting or gardening. About 40% of those who hire day laborers are homeowners, and an equal percentage are subcontractors.

Although the work is difficult and sometimes dangerous, the study clearly shows that day laborers who are persistent, competent and assertive can earn a decent living, particularly in the high-demand summer months. Nearly all pay for some sort of housing and still manage to send home an average of \$ 2,600 a year.

In a good month, workers said, they typically earned slightly more than \$ 1,000, on which they did not pay taxes. During a bad month, however, their income could drop by as much as two-thirds.

That compares with nearly \$ 1,000 a month--minus about 20% in state, federal and Social Security taxes--earned by a full-time minimum-wage worker in California.

Along with the jobs comes risk. Half the workers said they had been abused by employers at least once, usually in the form of nonpayment or insufficient payment. Others said they were forced to work without breaks, or were robbed or threatened.

On-the-job injuries are another risk that day laborers are ill prepared to face. No workers in the study had private health insurance. If they were hurt, most sought help from storefront medical clinics or from neighborhood botanicas. Only the most serious cases warranted an expensive trip to the hospital.

Although the study provides the first research-based portrait of day laborers, it has no easy answers for policymakers struggling to balance the concerns of residents and business owners with the rights of laborers to solicit work.

Valenzuela said he hopes that further research, including in-depth interviews with workers, employers and residents near hiring sites, will lead to innovative policy recommendations.

He is confident that the issue will not go away. In fact, Valenzuela said the explosion of day laborers on Southland street corners probably will continue as consumers--particularly private homeowners--become more accustomed to using them.

"As people realize how easy it is to hire these guys, it has a multiplier effect," he said. "The bans might stifle it a bit. The hiring centers may stabilize it. But everything I've learned in these two years suggests this will continue to grow."

Profile of Day Laborers

Nearly all of the 20,000 day laborers in the Los Angeles area emigrated from Mexico or Central America. A surprising number have worked day jobs for years, indicating a preference for the unstable work over more traditional low-wage jobs.



2-5 years	31%
6-10 years	20%
10 years	5%
Less than 1 year	43%

18-27 years	38%
28-37 years	28%
38-47 years	20%
48-57 years	10%

U.S.	1%
Mexico	78%
Central America	20%
Other	1%

Source: UCLA Center for the Study of Urban Poverty

Note: Figures may not total 100 because of rounding.

Originally published in *Los Angeles Times*. June 19, 1999, Saturday, Home Edition. Part A; Page 1; Metro Desk. Pictures property of UCLA Dept of Urban Planning and CCC.

DO NOT REPRINT WITHOUT PERMISSION.